THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO RADIO AND PODCAST STUDIES

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WHEN BIG BUSINESS WAS IN SHOW BUSINESS
US radio before television

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Lee Bristol, vice president of the pharmaceutical company Bristol-Myers, was a guest on a 1939 broadcast of comedian Fred Allen's *Town Hall Tonight* in a segment about 'odd occupations.' Allen asked Bristol how one becomes a radio sponsor, the profiled job of the week, and Bristol replied, 'Well, first you have to get a business, naturally … If you want the business to grow you have to advertise. Advertising today involves radio.' And then, according to Bristol, 'The first thing you know you wake up at an audition. A dotted line appears from under an advertising agency vice-president's coat. And the next thing you know – you're a sponsor.' Allen replied, 'Sounds sort of complicated, doesn't it?' Bristol answered, 'Yes, Fred. To the average business man, suddenly getting involved with swing bands, scat singers and comedians, it is rather confusing.' Bristol went on, 'Several nights each week I have to listen to the radio programs we sponsor.' 'Gosh,' Allen replied, 'a sponsor's life is sure tough. You not only pay for radio programs you have to listen to them, as well' (*Town Hall Tonight*, 1939).

US radio during the period before television differed from that of later eras in at least one key respect: advertisers had direct program control through program sponsorship. As Roy Durstine (1938), a founder of the major American advertising agency Batten Barton Durstine & Osborn (BBDO), asserted, 'Big business has learned a new vocabulary. … It's now in show business' (p. 19). A radio sponsor was an advertiser who rented airtime from a broadcaster and hired others to produce the program. Because a single advertiser bought an entire time period and usually promoted a single product on that sponsored program, this type of advertising was called single sponsorship. Radio sponsors often hired their advertising agencies to develop program concepts, hire talent and production staff, write scripts, and oversee individual broadcasts during the airtime they selected and rented from broadcasters (Meyers, 2014). Only after television replaced radio as the primary entertainment medium in the home did broadcasters take full control over program decisions and scheduling. The role of the broadcast advertiser then shifted to the purchasing of interstitial time between program segments. But before television's ascension, boosters such as Durstine (1938) could claim that '[r]adio's is perhaps the most dramatic application of showmanship to business' (p. 19). The rise of radio sponsorship meant that 'big business' was not just involved in the manufacturing, distributing, and marketing of products but was also the overseer of 'swing bands, scat singers and comedians.'

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Commercialism on the air

In the 1920s advertiser-supported programming was not the obvious answer to the question of how to develop radio as a business (Doerksen, 2005; Douglas, 1987; Smulyan, 1994). The political climate in the US was hostile to tax-supported programming, which was perceived as an improper assumption of state power over media and a violation of the First Amendment (Streeter, 1996). While patent-holders and manufacturers could profit from selling radio equipment, broadcasters could not charge audiences admission fees to broadcast programs. Concerns about audience resistance to 'direct advertising' led many, including then-Secretary of State Herbert Hoover, to encourage businesses to use radio for 'indirect advertising' instead, that is, as a promotional or public relations medium (Hoover, 1924, p. 4). Allowing businesses to sponsor programs named after their products (e.g., *Ipana Troubadours, Eveready Hour, Clicquot Club Eskimos*) was one way to commercialize broadcasting without alienating audiences with direct product advertising. The Radio Act of 1927 and the Federal Radio Commission's General Order 40 of 1928 both supported this aim by favouring commercial stations for allocation and licensing (McChesney, 1993).

Consequently, broadcasters urged advertisers to use radio to 'bring about a feeling of gratitude and pleasant obligation' on the part of the listener (Arnold, 1927, p. 11). Radio, as advertising executive Durstine (1928) argued, 'can create a personality so that millions will feel that they know him intimately. It can build an extraordinary fund of good-will' (p. 631). In the face of many advertisers' initial reluctance to believe in the power of 'good-will,' commercial broadcasting boosters emphasized radio's presumed powerful media effects. Radio 'permeates everything, everywhere' (Rice 1926, p. 72) and so can reach 'vast audiences simultaneously' ('Broadcast advertising: The sales voice of America,' 1929, p. 5). Moreover, these vast audiences were not massed in public but were relaxing in the privacy of their homes with family and so, it was hoped, all the more receptive to advertising: 'A broadcast advertisement is intimate, confidential. It is permitted to take part in the family life. It enjoys the confidence of the family circle' (Broadcast advertising, n.d.). Radio offered advertisers advantages over print media. While print advertising appealed to the 'eye,' radio appealed to audiences' ears, 'a most receptive channel for appeals to reason or emotion' (Boice, 1937). And the power of the human voice exceeds that of silent printed text: radio 'presents the *living* voice of authority,' which gives it the 'supple power to move people and mold them, to enlist them and command them' (Kesten, n.d.).

This hyperbole may have been designed to counter the ongoing skepticism of advertisers and their agencies toward using radio as an advertising medium (Smulyan, 1994, pp. 75–77). Skeptics raised a number of objections. Radio programming was more ephemeral than print. Unlike a magazine's 'circulation' (or numbers of copies per issue), the number of listeners radio signals reached was difficult if not impossible to measure (Russo, 2010, p. 7). Radio waves seemed more invasive and less controllable than newspapers or magazines that were purchased and brought into the home intentionally. Readers might skip past print ads, but a radio listener had no choice but to endure a radio commercial. A 1922 editorial in the advertising trade magazine *Printers' Ink* argued that 'the family circle is not a public place, and advertising has no business intruding there unless it is invited' (p. 201). Of course, *Printer's Ink* had a vested interest in warding off radio's threat to the print purveyors that advertised in its pages (Fox, 1984, p. 153). Radio waves could bring unwelcome material into the domestic sphere; inappropriate material could cause the 'red radio ears' of embarrassment (NBC, 1936). Many in the advertising industry felt that 'good-will' advertising was useful only for companies foolish enough to care less about their product sales than their public image, companies that wanted only to

scratch a 'publicity itch' – seeking glory, not sales ('Acute inflammatory radioitis,' 1928, p. 82). Advertisers seeking to burnish their image by sponsoring 'highbrow' cultural forms such as opera and serious theatre (Koppes, 1969) were reluctant to interrupt such elite fare with 'direct advertising' of consumer goods that might seem crass by comparison.

Others feared that commercial radio was 'selling its editorial pages' (An advertising agency executive, 1931) by collapsing the distinction between advertising and editorial content, eliminating the textual and visual conventions of print media that cued readers as to what was paid advertising and what was editorial content. According to one advertising executive,

> When radio began the broadcasting companies couldn't afford to pay for their entertainment … They said to the large national advertiser, 'If you will put on a fine singer and a fine orchestra and a fine quartet, why, we will let you mention the name of your company.' In doing just that the radio companies actually said to the advertisers: 'Here is a nice chair marked "Editor" and another nice chair marked "Circulation Manager." Would you kindly sit in both and do their jobs as well as your own?'
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> *Angus, 1932, p. 26*

Commercial radio boosters such as Durstine (1929, May 28) saw nothing to fear in such conflation; in fact, he argued, the needs of business were well aligned with those of the audience: 'The wisdom of having business run radio programs is apparent when you remember that business wants radio programs to pay' (p. 3).

By the mid-1930s, doubts of radio's efficacy as an advertising medium largely disappeared as more and more advertisers rushed to rent time from broadcasters. National advertiser spending on network radio increased from $18 million in 1929 to $39 million in 1932, and then to $165 million by 1937 (Dygert, 1939, p. 7). The advent of the Great Depression may have had much to do with this. Some advertisers hoped that radio, with its presumed powerful media effects, could stimulate faltering consumer demand (Marchand, 1985). Broadcasters aggressively courted advertisers to sponsor programming and so save themselves from risking limited resources on programming (Meyers, 2014, pp. 42–54). And ad agencies, facing the collapse of advertiser demand for print media space and the subsequent loss of agency print media commissions, eagerly leapt at the opportunity to earn media commissions from broadcasters instead. But some skeptics remained; as *Fortune* magazine described it, broadcasters were attempting to 'sell time, an invisible commodity, to fictitious beings called corporations for the purpose of influencing an audience that no one can see' ('And all because they're smart,' 1935, p. 82).

Showmanship and salesmanship

Sponsored radio provided 'free' entertainment to audiences in exchange for their attention. As Durstine (1930) explained, 'The public wants entertainment. The advertiser wants the public's attention and is willing to pay for it. Therefore, let the advertiser provide the entertainment' (p. 28). During the 1930s and 1940s, the direct involvement of advertisers in broadcast entertainment became the accepted norm: the system of sponsorship addressed the desire of broadcasters for program subsidy, the desire of advertisers for consumers' attention, and the desire of audiences for low-cost accessible entertainment. It was, in the words of one observer, a time 'when advertising joined hands with showmanship' (Aylesworth, 1932, p. 450).

Many advertisers doubted whether the denizens of the entertainment industries would or could design entertainment that was also advertising. 'The showman,' sniffed Durstine,

'isn't an advertising man' (1929, May 28, p. 10). To ensure their advertising goals were put first, advertisers soon turned to their advertising agencies. BBDO was at the forefront of the movement of ad agencies into actual program production for their clients: 'The program or commercial broadcast should ... be developed and supervised, not by outsiders, but by an advertiser's own agency with a thorough understanding of sales and advertising objectives' (BBDO, 1932, p. 2). BBDO founder Durstine (1929, May 28) pointed out that '[t]he same people who prepare the copy going into the magazines and newspapers can most logically prepare the scripts which will carry the same message' (p. 7) on radio. Some even argued that producing entertainment and writing advertising copy required much the same skills: copywriters, according to one observer, 'are the chaps who have spent years dramatizing a bar of soap' (Martin, 1932, p. 76).

Like the advertising industry, the entertainment industry was inherently risky: the audience's response was unpredictable; the failure rate was high; the risk of offence was omnipresent. To produce endless new material, to manage creative workers and performers, required vast outlays of money, energy, and time. If most advertisers knew nothing about producing entertainment, or choosing entertainment that would attract their consumers, ad agencies were often likewise at sea. One observer noted that the rise of radio was 'no special boon' to agencies since it 'forced them into the entertainment business, a field in which they had no experience' (Hower, 1939, p. 167). In identifying 'what the radio audience wants,' advertising executives could only speculate: perhaps they want 'entertainment which they can personalize' (Robinson, 1932, p. 45). There was no consensus among them even on the most basic points. One executive asserted that, 'Adults in the mass – even opera audiences – think slowly when at all. And are childlike' (Goode and Kaufman, 1936, p. 195); another argued that 'the idea that the way to get a big audience is to play down to the moron is all wrong' (Staff meeting minutes, 1930, p. 6).

Some members of the entertainment industries resented the encroachment of the advertising industry into their territory; the Hollywood movie star Mary Pickford (1934), for example, complained, 'that possibly many radio shows of today have been constructed by salesmen rather than showmen' (p. 57). Others complained that sponsors were ruining radio by treating it primarily as advertising, 'a thing entirely apart from show business' ('Radio – If the stars were czars,' 1934, p. 46). Sponsored radio programs were just like travelling medicine shows: dancers and musicians would attract a crowd, then pitch patent medicines. As one advertising executive confessed, 'Get the crowd around, and then sell your wares. Good radio is just as simple as that' (Colwell, 1932, p. 26).

The term 'showmanship,' which one observer defined as 'the ability to make people pay attention by giving them what they like' (North, 1932, p. 13), became shorthand for whatever was successful in radio entertainment (Wang, 2007). Many in the advertising industry eagerly claimed expertise in this mysterious art. An entire trade publication, *Radio Showmanship* (1940–1947), was devoted to it. But there was an inherent conflict in sponsored entertainment; as one observer noted, 'Radio listeners want programs to be *interesting*, and sponsors want them to be *profitable*' (Wheeler, 1940, p. 6). What might appeal to audiences might not produce sales for the sponsor:

> A $20,000 all-star program on a coast-to-coast network may get fine press notices and win the sympathetic applause of those self-appointed advertising critics who are working for high cultural standards – but it's a dead loss to the advertiser if it's all showmanship and no salesmanship.
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> *Brown, 1932, p. 11*

Ad agencies were faced with an impossible dilemma:

> A radio program can 'sell' so hard and so consistently that the listening audience will fade out in boredom or disgust. Or it may be an 'impression' job with entertainment so fine that few people get, and none remember, the name and product of the sponsor.
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> *Ryan, 1934, p. 55*

Durstine (1930) argued that sponsored radio 'must both please the public and pay the advertiser' (p. 160), a neat trick for which there was no formula. Durstine (1929, May 28) also urged audiences 'to remember that the advertiser is paying the bill and that the advertiser should get the credit and the glory of the program' (p. 15).

Conflicts among sponsors and their radio stars made matters worse. Stars would complain that sponsors 'tramp with hobnailed shoes over the gossamer fabric of the entertainment' (Dygert, 1939, p. 14). The figure of the demanding and unreasonable radio sponsor was lampooned in Hollywood movies such as A Letter from Three Wives (1949) and *The Hucksters* (1947). Some sponsors, having footed the bill for the airtime and the talent, expected to have a say in program details; as one observer reported, 'I saw an eminent manufacturer of perfumery march up to a dull, middle-aged actress and tell her tearfully: "My good woman, I'm paying for this program and I want you to put some passion into it!"' (Staff meeting minutes, 1932, February 2, p. 4). Many sponsors regarded the time taken for entertainment as time taken from selling – a kind of loss leader. A network executive defended sponsors by pointing out that print publications routinely allocate up to half of their pages to advertising but that 'only 6.8% of the network's total program time is devoted to commercial announcements' (Trammell, 1946, p. 9).

In earliest commercial radio, sponsors ensured 'sponsor identification' by using the brand name in the program title; the brand, not the performer, was the 'star' of *The Eveready Hour* and *The Clicquot Club Eskimos*. Hence the well-known bandleader Sam Lanin was not named as the star of the toothpaste-sponsored *Ipana Troubadors*. However, the drawing power of stars soon proved itself. As one executive noted, 'There is one sort of show that will always be good. That is a show on which you spend a great deal of money' for a Clark Gable or an Al Jolson (Staff Meeting Minutes, 1932, June 22). Increased demand for stars, the supply of which was limited, also increased their asking prices, raising budgets, and intensifying competition. Relying on stars, warned one executive, 'serves rather to add to the glory of the featured artists than to increase materially the sales of merchandise of the sponsor' (Sinsheimer, 1934, p. 32).

Star performers, especially those successful in other venues such as theatre, film, and music, had to navigate a tricky dynamic with radio sponsors, whose aim was to build their brand not the stars' careers. Stars such as Fred Waring pointed out that, 'Advertisers should realize that people listen to the radio not for the advertising but for the entertainment' ('Radio – If the Stars Were Czars,' 1934, p. 16). But stars' demand for more creative control rankled many sponsors, who believed that whoever 'pays the piper' should be able 'to call the tunes' (Flynn, 1938, p. 433). One executive insisted that 'to place the entertainer in charge of your radio advertising is to subordinate the advertising viewpoint to the artistic viewpoint' (Wren, 1930, p. 23). Some major stars conceded the point. Eddie Cantor (1934) seemed to acknowledge the sponsors' privilege: 'Radio is not the show business but the advertising business with the show business grafted on. Therefore, I say that the star should listen sympathetically to the sponsor' (p. 19). In order to convince audiences of the authenticity of the star's endorsement of the sponsor's product, singer Kate Smith suggested that 'it is vital that the product must be one of mutual approval and admiration by both the artist and the sponsor. … There must be complete *esprit de corps* between sponsor, agency and artist' ('Radio – If the stars were czars,' 1934, p. 46). In

sum, as BBDO radio producer Arthur Pryor, Jr., explained, 'The show's the thing, of course. But in commercial radio, the show is a means to an end – the only reason it is on the air is to sell' (Cummings & Danforth, 1933, p. 19).

Advertisers used stars not only because they attracted audiences but also because advertisers hoped a strong positive association between a star and the sponsoring product would stimulate sales. Endorsements and testimonials had long been a favoured advertising strategy (Segrave, 2005). The advertising agency J. Walter Thompson pursued a star-centric advertising strategy for Lux soap, using film star endorsements in print ads and sponsoring radio versions of recent Hollywood films on *Lux Radio Theatre* (Meyers, 2014, p. 216). Others questioned the usefulness of star associations: if, for example, Eddie Cantor's eponymous *The Eddie Cantor Radio Show* was sponsored in turn by Old Gold cigarettes, Sunkist oranges, Chase & Sanborn coffee, Camel cigarettes, and Texaco gasoline, with which sponsor would audiences identify Cantor (Hughes, 1939, p. 22)? Some listener surveys concluded that the association of stars with products or sponsors was weak, undermining the very purpose of high-priced stars for the sponsors (Herbert, 1936, p. 465). Furthermore, the power of star endorsements could create a negative association with a brand – this fear would eventually contribute to the practice of blacklisting in broadcasting (Meyers, 2018).

The decline of single sponsorship

By the late 1940s, the single-sponsor format seemed unassailable. Networks enjoyed increasing revenues from advertisers outbidding each other for airtime; program production shifted from New York to Hollywood in order to better leverage star talent; and the radio sponsor appeared to be a permanent addition to the entertainment industry. A backlash arose. Critics of radio blamed sponsors and ad agencies for ruining what should have been an uplifting, educational medium (Newman, 2004). As radio developer Lee De Forest himself fulminated, 'You have debased this child, you have sent him out on the street in rags of ragtime, tatters of jive and boogie-woogie to collect money from all and sundry for hubba hubba and audio jitterbug' (Revolt against radio, 1947, p. 101). A great deal of this 'revolt against radio' reflected conflicts over cultural values. As one executive argued, 'the critics of commercial radio are critics not of art, not of intrinsic goodness, but of the national taste' (Revolt against radio, 1947, p. 172). The critics who decried radio programming as 'either corny, strident, boresome, florid, inane, repetitive, irritating, offensive, moronic, adolescent, or nauseating' (Revolt against radio, 1947, p. 101) may have also been complaining about the overuse of 'hard sell' advertising strategies on radio, strategies that rely on repetition to ensure listener comprehension (Angus, 1931; Meyers, 2011). As to critics who argued that commercial radio did not fulfil regulators' mandate that it serve the 'public interest,' an NBC executive asserted that sponsored entertainment was itself a 'public service': 'A comedian lifts people, gets them out of the dumps. I think that is a public service program' (quoted in Peatman, 1945, p. 25).

Although reformers blamed sponsorship for over-commercializing broadcasting, some broadcasting industry insiders also were critical of sponsorship not because it was too commercial but because it eroded broadcasting's commercial effectiveness. Sponsorship limited advertising effectiveness in several ways. First, sponsorship required a brand to be linked to a specific program or type of entertainment. That limited the audience to those listeners interested in that type of program. Second, that linkage presented risks of negative associations, should the star talent alienate or offend audiences. Third, advertisers who could afford only one program were limited to a single time slot for delivering an advertising message: if it were the wrong choice, either of time or program, the advertiser risked alienating the very audience it wished

to engage. Fourth, sponsors and their agencies struggled with how best to integrate selling with entertainment without offending audiences. Using cast members to pitch products was one strategy for integrating the advertising message into the program text; for example, performers on the variety program *Maxwell House Show Boat* often sipped Maxwell House coffee between acts (Hobler, n.d., p. 98). However, not every radio star agreed to participate (Foreman, 1950). This led to constant debate over the alignment of entertainment with selling, or the compatibility of 'showmanship' with 'salesmanship.'

As a solution for advertisers, then, single sponsorship left much to be desired. Despite the success stories – *Amos 'n' Andy*'s increasing sales of Pepsodent tooth powder, *Kraft Music Hall*'s increasing cheese sales, and comedian Jack Benny's rescuing of the failing dessert brand Jell-O – the actual impact of radio sponsorship on product sales was hard to measure. Although some radio fans may have purchased products out of gratitude, radio sponsorship by itself did not guarantee rising sales. Studies of listeners' awareness of sponsors indicated that 'sponsor identification' was quite weak for all but a few programs (Herbert, 1936). If audiences were not grateful enough or easily influenced by the powerful effects of radio waves to change their buying decisions, then some sponsors may have believed they were paying too much for too little. Perhaps some sponsors' efforts to control programs reflected their frustrations and doubts over sponsorship's effectiveness.

Despite such concerns, many broadcast sponsors continued to hold tightly onto single sponsorship until the advent of television and its far higher production expense altered the economic equation. The sponsors of highbrow cultural fare, such as US Steel, more interested in their corporate images than product sales, might view their sponsorship of live dramas as directly contributing to the requirement that broadcasting serve the 'public interest.' But consumer packaged goods manufacturers, such as Procter & Gamble, preferred to advertise a variety of brands across multiple times of day (Boddy, 1990, p. 159). Meanwhile, broadcasters and ad agencies began to shift away from recommending single sponsorship, urging advertisers to consider 'participating sponsorship' and finally the 'magazine concept,' in which advertisers simply bought short time slots interstitially within and around programs that broadcasters themselves financed and scheduled (Meyers, 2011). Not only did 'commercials' allow advertisers more mobility and flexibility, they also prevented risky associations with any single program or star.

As television replaced radio as the central entertainment medium in the home, and as US radio retooled itself as an out-of-the-home medium for music, talk, news, and sports, single sponsorship went into steep decline. 'Big business' sponsors such as Lee Bristol were no longer in charge of 'swing bands, scat singers and comedians.' As one BBDO executive recalled, 'One sacred cow that we all believed in was ground to hamburger. That was "sponsor identification"' (Brower, 1974, p. 213). Rosser Reeves, one of the most famous advertising executives of the era, had never accepted sponsorship as an effective advertising strategy and had always urged his clients to buy 'spots' (short time slots for commercials). He had argued, 'If you want to be famous, buy shows; if you want to be rich, buy spots' (Mayer, 1965, p. 18). By the end of the 1950s, time had proved him right.

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